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C O N F I D E N T I A L MUSCAT 000006

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: OMANIS CONTINUE PROTESTS AGAINST ISRAELI ACTIONS
IN GAZA

REF: MUSCAT 879

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Following smaller peaceful protests on December 28 against Israeli air strikes in Gaza (reftel), a large demonstration denouncing Israel took place January 2 outside the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat following afternoon prayers. The Royal Oman Police (ROP) estimated the number of demonstrators at 1,700 to 2,000, although other sources assert a lesser figure. The government approved the protest, but members of the security services - both in uniform and plain clothes - kept a watchful eye on demonstrators to ensure they remained orderly and did not stray from the mosque's grounds.

¶2. (SBU) Protest organizers, who called for the demonstration on popular on-line blogs and discussion sites, posted notices and sent mobile phone text messages asking participants to keep the protest peaceful, carry only Omani or Palestinian flags, and refrain from burning the flag of the U.S. as it was a "legitimate, friendly country." Omani demonstrators were also requested to wear the customary dishdash, rather than non-Omani attire. Despite these admonitions, some protesters waved Hamas flags or banners expressing support for Hamas and/or Hizballah. Chanting demonstrators reportedly included anti-American and anti-Egyptian slogans alongside refrains denouncing Israel. "Down with the Zionist regime, America and conspirators" was one such refrain.

¶3. (SBU) The Omani government has not issued any official statements regarding events in Gaza since the end of the GCC Summit in Muscat. On January 3, however, the head of the government-affiliated Oman Charitable Organization (OCO) announced that per the directive of Sultan Qaboos, the first of two airplanes carrying "urgent relief assistance" would depart Muscat the following day to help the Palestinian people "withstand the Israeli aggression." According to the OCO, the aid will consist of medical supplies, food and electrical generators.

¶4. (SBU) Editorials in local papers addressing the situation in Gaza have been vitriolic in their condemnation of Israel. An op-ed article which appeared prominently on the front page of the English language daily "Times of Oman" on January 4, for example, was entitled "How Israel Became a Terrorist State." Many Omani televisions, including those at cafes, barber shops and other public places that are usually tuned into entertainment channels, have been locked onto al-Jazeera for ongoing coverage of the violence in Gaza. Only the Oman-hosted Gulf Cup soccer tournament, which began the evening of January 4, has been able to capture a comparable level of public attention.

¶5. (C) At an evening gathering December 31 at Bait al Baraka, the Sultan's residence, to celebrate the new year, senior Omani officials offered their personal commentary on the Gaza events. Minister of the Royal Office Ali bin Majid al Ma'amari told the Ambassador that he understood Israel's

need to address "the Hamas problem," but attacking innocent Palestinian women and children was intolerable. "Doesn't Israel understand what it's doing to itself in the Arab world?" The Sultan's Advisor for External Affairs, Dr. Omar al Zawawi, asserted that Israel is perpetrating a "Palestinian holocaust" and creating a "new generation of Arabs who will hate Israel and the United States." Both figures were speaking on the basis of the Arab media's coverage of Gaza, which has been virulently critical not only of Israel and the U.S., but also of Arab governments for their failure to respond effectively to the crisis.

¶6. (C) Comment: Further public protests against Israel are likely as long as military strikes against Gaza continue. The government reportedly has already denied several requests for demonstrations, including a request for a protest march in the interior city of Nizwa on January 1, but will have to allow some to go forward to provide a public release for increasing Omani anger at Israeli actions. Security forces should continue to ensure that such demonstrations remain non-violent and stay far away from foreign diplomatic missions. End Comment.
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